DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 076 725 UD 013 514

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| AUTHOR | Cusick, Philip A.; Ayling, Richard J. |
| TITLE | Racial Interaction in an Urban, Secondary School. |
| SPONS AGENCY | Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. |
| PUB DATE | Feb 73 |
| GRANT | OEG-5-72-0036(509) |
| NOTE | 16p.; Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual convention, New Orleans, La., February 1973 |
| EDRS PRICE | MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29 |
| DESCRIPTORS | Caucasians; Classroom Environment; *Classroom Observation Techniques; *Conflict; High Schools; Negroes; Participation; *Race Relations; School Environment; *School Integration; School Role; Teacher Role; *Urban Education |

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to determine where, to what extent, and what was the nature of black and white student interaction in the school, and how these interactions affected other facets of the school's organization. Through a six-month participant observation, the authors found that interracial interaction occurred only in the classrooms where students were academically motivated and the teacher was highly structured. Blacks and whites avoided each other outside the classroom to avoid racial violence. (DM)

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# BIRACIAL INTERACTION IN AN URBAN, SECONDARY SCHOOL[1]

by

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Despite the interest in and discussion of how to achieve integration in urban, secondary schools, there seems to be a lack of information about what black and white students who are presently in desegrated schools do together. Many of those who teach and administer in them, and even those who merely visit, report that while the schools are desegrated, the students are not integrated. Blacks come to school, attend class, eat and hang around the halls with other blacks, while whites do those things with other whites. However, while this may appear to be the case, it is obviously oversimplified. Anyone who works in those schools can also point out many instances of individual interaction among blacks and whites and indeed, why not? They are in the immediate presence of one another for six or more hours each day, assume the same student role, share classes, activities and sports, and therefore, must have some personal contact, and even those without the personal contact must have a basic understanding of how to behave and act toward a student of the "other" race. If they did not have that, those schools would be in a constant state of riotous disruption, which, despite many newspaper accounts to the contrary, they are not. Therefore, while on one hand blacks and whites may seem to generally ignore each other, many individual blacks and whites do interact and get

1. This project was undertaken with the financial assistance of the U.S.O.E. (Grant No. O.E.G.-5-72-0036(509)

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along; and even those who do not interact have a fairly consistent way of dealing with members of the "other" race.

Given this situation, the purpose of this project was to do a systematic inquiry into biracial interaction in an urban, secondary school to determine:

1) Where and to what extent do black and white students interact in the school?

2) What is the nature of their interactions?

And, finally,

3) How do these interactions or perhaps lack of interactions affect other facets of the school's organization; i.e., teacher-administrator behavior, classroom structure, discipline, extracurricular activities, etc.

Methodology[2]

Because we did not feel that we knew enough about the issue to generate a hypothesis-testing design, and because we wanted as precise a description of biracial interaction as possible, even to the point of recording examples of cafeteria conversation and informal group behavior, we chose the methodology of participant observation. That is, after obtaining permission, we scheduled ourselves into a large, biracial, urban, secondary school for a few days each week for a period of six months. During that time we attended classes, ate in the cafeteria, saw activities and athletic events, hung around the halls and, in general, stayed as close to the students as possible. We observed, carried on informal interviews, collected background material, and even scheduled formal interviews with some

2. See, Cusick, Philip A., "Inside High School: The Student's World," Holt, Rinehart & Winston, N.Y., 1973., for a more complete account of the methodology.

students and staff to check our continually developing perceptions. Finally, after massing all this information, we attempted to analyze it and develop an explanation of biracial interaction and its effect in at least one secondary school. The task, therefore, was to (1) develop a description and (2) explain that description.

Our intent was not to prove or disprove some stated hypotheses but to develop a model explaining relationships between some concepts, and in this type of study randomness of selection is not important.

> The researcher who generates theory need not combine random sampling with theoretical sampling when setting forth relationships among categories and properties. The relationships are suggested as hypotheses pertinent to directions of relations, not tested as descriptions of direction and magnitude. Conventional theorizing claims generality of scope; that is, one assumes that if the relationship holds for one group under certain conditions it will probably hold for other groups under the same conditions.[3]

What is important, then, is not random selection, but simply that one find a general situation wherein the subject phenomenon occurs. In this case, the phenomenon was biracial interaction and the situation was a large, urban secondary school. Hopefully, the description and explanation we develop can be used to generate testable hypotheses which may apply to other situations.

We do not claim that the school selected is "representative," but let us say that it contained those specific phenomena in which we were interested. To be honest, our selection was based on where "they would let us in" since some districts frankly refused to allow us to enter what they considered to be an already-unhappy situation.

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3. Bernard Glasen and Anselm Strauss, "Theoretical Sampling" in Norman K. Densin, Ed., Sociological Methods (Aldine Publishing Company, 1970), p. 106.

The School

If one begins this type of study, he usually assumes that much of the behavior takes place in relation to the environment, and for that reason we should give some attention to Central High's structure. Placing the action "in situ" is our method of making it intelligible.

We were granted permission to carry out the study in City Central High School,[4] which is located in a northern industrial city of 250,000 inhabitants. Of the school's 1,726 students in grades ten, eleven, and twelve, 26% are black, 71% white, and the remainder are Chicano. While there were a few students from one section who might be termed wealthy, the great majority, both black and white, are in the lower and lower-middle classes. In the recent past, the school, as all the high schools in the city, has had some history of racial discord, but the previous two school years had been relatively quiet with only one major disruption. The school selected, then, is moderately large, serves students in the lower to middle classes, is located in an industrial, urban setting, has been racially mixed for a long time, and has had some history of racial discord.

The school's attendance area contains many of the, frankly, less desirable urban characteristics. As well as some areas of pleasant homes, it contained the worst of the city's decaying sections. The area also is fragmented with main streets, industrial parks, civic, commercial, and even educational complexes, and further divided by superhighways, a river, and a number of open spaces such as cemeteries and playgrounds. The students, then, come from a number of color and class bound enclaves and there is little in the school's attendance area that would lead one to think of it as a community.

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4. The proper names of people and places have been changed to insure anonymity.

The internal organization of the school is tightly run and traditionally modeled. The day's six classes are 57 minutes each, with only five minutes in between. There are no homeroom or activity or study periods, and few special activities for more than a few students at a time. Therefore, all of the students are kept in a structured classroom under teacher direction for the entire day. The long, straight halls are kept free of students during those periods by four of five administrators who are in the halls near the lavatories during the class changing times, and by the four security guards stationed at the entrances to keep out perennial and unwanted visitors. The cafeteria period is brief, allowing students to each lunch in one of three half hour shifts, and it, too, is heavily supervised. The total organization strives for order, promptness, obedience to the numerous rules -- i.e., no smoking, fighting, insubordination, skipping, tardiness, drugs, or violations of the pass system. Students who violate the many rules are subject to immediate suspension. In fact, during the first six months of the year, 410 students were suspended for periods of from three to ten days.

The organization spends a great deal of time and effort trying to discourage spontaniety, enthusiasm, and spur-of-the-momentness. They do not fit in with the organization's pre-arranged structure, and they are never seriously discussed as alternatives to the present system. According to administrators and teachers, and even many students, the things that go wrong in the school do so not because there is an over-emphasis on bureaucratic procedures, but because the bureaucratic procedures are not adequately adhered to by the personnel.

## The Students

There are a number of things that one sees immediately in the halls of Central. For one, the students are tremendously variated. Not only does their

race divide them, but many of them are merely children: light and small, boys unshaven, girls in childish dresses -- while others are clearly adults, the boys tall and muscular, the girls developed and capable of bearing children and raising a family. Then, too, social class is evident. Many of the students are poor and it shows, even in this day when many adolescents wear old clothes. There is a distinct difference between studied and necessitated shabbiness. The former is most seriously practiced by the "freaks," a sizeable group who affect the long hair, army fatigues, and the arms-hanging, shoulders-forward walk. They, according to some, are "the rich kids -- they can afford the drugs." They do not look like the others who are sallow complected, wear cheap clothes, and run-down shoes.

And the racial split is obvious: the "freaks" who gather by the entrance to the gym are all white, the boys in the north corner all black, white girls are with white girls, white boys are with white boys. The couples are either both white or both black. Although there were rumors of interracial dating, only twice did we see a white girl openly conversing with a black boy in the school, and never did we see a white boy with a black girl.

Between classes, although there are three times as many whites as blacks, the blacks seem to hold their own. That is, they are not a reticent minority, but constitute a vocal and vigorous group. It almost seems that the whites are the most quiet, reserved, and private in their interactions, the blacks more likely to greet each other and interact in loud voices and with vigorous gestures. But they carry on their interactions only with other blacks. There is no interracial interaction in the halls.

The cafeteria is the same way. The blacks always occupied the southeast quarter and never in six months did we see a white student with blacks. Nor did

we ever see blacks interspersed in the other part of the cafeteria. It just did not happen. John, a white, asked us our first day if we would like to eat with him. We said "Yes," but that we wanted also to go with George, a black. "Oh, they sit on the other side of the cafeteria. No law -- it's just the way it is."

Of course, we never heard mention of this phenomenon, but if we asked, the answer was always like John's. There seemed to be no bitterness or animosity about the line. Crossing it is just something one does not do. Ramona expressed the same thing:

"Do you have any white friends?"

"Well, if they want to hang around with me, they can. I don't dislike whites none."

"Would you eat with them -- in the cafeteria?"

"Well," said Mary, her friend, "that situation just never occurs -- I would -- but I just never had to -- at all."

Of course, one might ask, "What would happen if a black went over and sat with whites or a white with the blacks?", but it is difficult to say because it never happened. One might find himself socially ostracized. As two blacks said when we asked if they would consider such a move:

"Well, that'd be awfully hard. You just couldn't do that," said Dan.

John agreed. "You can do it ... and they'll talk about it. But words hurt. They won't hit you. Over at Northern you do something like that and they'll bust your head, the other blacks will... Over here, your friends will just talk about you."

But while the black and white students avoided each other in the cafeteria, just as in the halls, there is no problem. It seemed that the standoffishness was bred of respect; neither whites or blacks were eager to start open hostilities. Many whites feared the blacks and, as Ray, who was black, told us: "We used to say that one black was worth two whites, but not anymore. Some of these whites are really bad-ass." This meant that what trouble did occur in the cafeteria was of an isolated nature and no more than might be expected in a place where five hundred adolescents gather. So, in both halls and cafeteria the blacks and whites simply ignored each other.

The classrooms were the most interesting. As stated, the students spent almost all their time there in the company of teachers and it was the only place with the exception of athletic events that we saw any interracial interaction. Of course, in almost all classes the whites outnumber the blacks, with the exception of Harlem Renaissance or Black Literature, which, except for one or two whites, were entirely black. The racial split in most classes is as obvious as it is anywhere. The blacks come in together, sit, exchange papers, share work and gossip with each other, and, of course, whites do those things with whites.

But there was some interracial interaction and it occurred where (1) the students were academically motivated, and (2) the teacher was highly structured. Only in these situations did we ever witness any consistent interaction between black and white students, and the interaction was work oriented. That is, papers and comments and answers would be shared among them while the teacher would be maintaining his centrality in a work-oriented situation. In all other classes, those in which teachers did nothing, and there were more than a few, those having structured teachers, but somewhat indifferent students, or even those in which, while the students were motivated, the teacher did not maintain his

centrality, the racial lines were not crossed. Or, let us say, if they were crossed, it was an individual, isolated incident, not a consistent and common phenomenon. Of course, in all classes, even those where blacks and whites did interact, as soon as the bell rang and the students entered the hall the split reappeared. This consistent interaction also occurred in the more demanding activities, such as sports or cheerleading. It seemed that when the task was demanding and the adult in charge maintained formal control, the situation was safe and racial barriers were put aside for the period of time demanded by the activity. When the activity ended, the blacks went back to interacting with blacks, and the whites with other whites.

There was an interesting exception to this, which we think helped explain it. One day in drama class the teacher tried to initiate a discussion of a movie about a racial incident. Only a few minutes after he started the students turned it into a heated discussion of race relations in the school and the class wound up in almost complete disruption. It concluded with the five blacks standing and yelling back at the surrounding whites:

"You called me a nigger."

"I did not."

"Yes, you did -- say it outloud -- go'wan."

"All right, you're a nigger."

"O.K., you called me that -- don't forget it."

"I won't."

"You ever come to my neighborhood, you'll get killed."

At that, to the teacher's relief, the bell rang. Earlier when he had tried to mediate the quarrel he was told by his students to "shut up." This and similar incidents indicated that the patterns of avoidance developed by blacks and whites

were purposeful, because no one really seemed to want outright violence. It was also a good example of what happens when teachers try to start "reasonable" and "detached" discussions of race relations. To many students there is nothing "reasonable" or "detached" about the issue.

The few incidents like that brought out the fact that there was real deep racial hatred in the school. It was not something that could have been reasoned away. The whites were referred to by many blacks as F------ honkies and whites referred to blacks as niggers and spades. And those blacks and whites who would have liked more interracial interaction were hindered by other blacks who were quite successful in preventing such things as interracial dating. The black girls were particularly severe with boys who were reputed to be "diggin' white chicks."

In checking the issue of togetherness among whites and togetherness among blacks, we found little of the former. As one popular white girl said, "There is a lot of snobbery here ... but then, we have a lot of white trash." Or, as the white president of the junior class said, referring to Auto Shop in which most students were white, "I wouldn't take Auto Shop ... I don't even want to go down there. That's a whole different class of guys."

At first we felt that the blacks were somewhat together, but as we continued our study we found that what divided them seriously was the difference of opinion on how to get along in a "white" institution. There were two excellent examples of this. One occurred when some blacks were trying to form a "Black Student Union" and in the course of three meetings the attempt fell apart because they could neither agree why a "Union" should be formed, nor how to form it. As soon as the black girls who started it tried to get any discussion going, some of

the more articulate boys derided them for being allied with the student union which they said did nothing for blacks and was simply a tool of the white principal. And when the most articulate and vociferous black male tried to make some sense of it he was derided for "diggin' a white girl on the side." When they began to argue among themselves, it was pointed out by the girls that "You're actin' just like a bunch of g------ niggers," and when one boy suggested that maybe if they had a dinner and called other blacks in, his suggestion, too, was derided. "There you go ... Like a bunch of niggers. Gotta give 'em something to eat to get them organized."

The fact that emerged was that while many resented living in a "white institution," others pointed out that while strict, as Daryl said, "It was fairly run." "As long as I walk from room 212 to 222 and keep my arms down, they can't do nothin' to me... and they don't."

Following the last meeting those girls who tried to start it simply cried over their frustrations ... and the Union never started.

A similar example occurred in April when the NAACP wanted to have a Martin Luther King day. I think the original idea was to promote interracial interaction, but that was ridiculed by the more angry blacks, ignored by the staff, and the white students simply stayed home, or, if they did come to school, didn't bother to attend the specific activities. As soon as the main event started, which was a discussion of race relations, the militant blacks derided the Chinese-Hawaiian teacher for even talking about racial harmony. "If interracial peace is the theme -- where are your whites?" And they were right. The whites were absent. While the day was successful, it was so only because a professional NAACP organization who had been invited got the blacks together with a dynamic speech on black awareness. In sum, we found a situation wherein not only were

blacks and whites apart from each other, but whites were equally divided among themselves by social class, and blacks were divided among themselves on how they should accommodate the "white" institution. Even the most angry blacks, who were the quickest to ridicule other blacks who participated in school activities and would refer to them as "colored" or "toms" or "white girl lovers" were not together when it came to action. When their apparent leader tried to start a racial fight, the others did not join him.

The final question is, "How do biracial interactions affect the school organization?" It is our opinion that biracialness has a decided effect on the organization because it is the strongest and most visible of the divisive factors operating in that school. It is certainly not the only divisive factor, but it is inextricably related to the others and it is the one that seems to exert the most influence and cause the most conflict.

Let us explain. Any organization has a number of basic elements: a formal structure with roles, patterns of communication and activity; an authority structure; a technology or some means of applying its resources to its raw material; and some agreed upon goals -- that is, a general awareness on the part of the participants of what the organization is all about, as well as a sense of knowing when it has or has not accomplished its task. In addition, there is a factor which may or may not be present to a high degree, but the degree of presence or absence of which has a very strong effect on that organization. That is, the factor of "consensual basis" -- or sense of "mutual cooperation" among the members. But while the individual students at Central believed in the school's worthwhileness (after all, Central is not a prison and if they did not like it, they could leave), they do not communicate or cooperate with one another

in order to achieve either individual or organizational success. Thus, at Central, there is little basis for the peaceful resolution of conflict among students.

And the potential for conflicts among students was painfully obvious. They came from a wide range of cultural, social, and economic classes, as well as geographical backgrounds. Not only were the blacks and whites separated by language, customs and color, but neither the blacks or the whites were together among themselves. We heard potential conflicts articulated everyday: Students referred to each other with feeling as "white trash," "rich kikes," "niggers," "spades," "coons," "toms," "colored," "white girl lovers," "f------ honkies," "freaks." There was really no reason for the students to have any consensual basis, communal spirit or mutual cooperativeness. The various individuals and factions didn't even like each other, and while they did not openly riot and while fights seldom occurred, the reason was that the formal organization was structured to "keep the lid on."

This, then, is the main point about biracialness and the organization of Central High. Biracialness contributed strongly to the creation of conflicts among the students and simultaneously prevented the students from creating an adequate "consensual basis" which might have been used to resolve those conflicts. Therefore, the organization was structured in such a way as to prevent those conflicts from disrupting the normal activities and had to adopt a number of decidedly restrictive characteristics: the school administrators spent their time in the halls to "make their presence felt," as the principal put it; the students were allowed no power; the periods were 57 minutes long with only a few minutes for passing; there were no free periods, no study halls; the cafeteria

service was brief one year, and even eliminated the next, and the administrators admitted they eliminated it for security reasons; school functions, such as dances and parties, were rare; funds had to be allocated for four security guards; and, as the principal put it, "If there's any question, I find it best to say 'No.'" The total organization was geared to prevent potential conflict among students from developing into open hostility. This effect even carried into the classrooms where the teachers had to make some accommodation with conflict among students. In fact, we believe that these techniques of non-teaching used by some teachers was a way of keeping potential conflict in balance. The teachers, by walking around and interacting with various individuals and small groups, kept the students -- many of whom were bored -- from joining together or interacting in any way which might have produced conflict either among the factions or between the teacher and the united students.

To briefly review the process, in his discussion of the positive function of conflict in organizations Cosar says:

> A social structure in which there can exist a multiplicity of conflicts contains a mechanism for bringing together otherwise isolated, apathetic, or mutually hostile parties and for taking them into the field of public activities. Moreover, such a structure fosters a multiplicity of associations and coalitions whose diverse purposes crisscross each other, we recall, thereby preventing alliances along one major line of cleavage.[5]

For most organizations that seems to make sense, but that is not a description of Central. While there is "a multiplicity of conflicts," there is no "mechanism for bringing together otherwise isolated, apathetic, or mutually hostile parties," and therefore, the social structure or organization had no effective way to deal

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5. Cosar, Lewis, The Function of Social Conflict (The Free Press), New York, 1956, p. 155.

with the conflicts inside its own walls.

And, too, as Cosar points out:

> What threatens equilibrium ... is not conflict as such, but the rigidity itself which permits hostilities to accumulate and to be channeled along one major line of cleavage once they break out in conflict.[6]

The interracial issue, while only one of the many conflicts, was regarded as particularly dangerous because it could be "channeled along one major line of cleavage," the line of race. In response to the fear of open racial hostility, the administrators adopted a rigid stand to literally "channel" that conflict out of school since they felt they had no effective way to ameliorate it.

In sum, there is a situation wherein -- we repeat -- there is a high potential for conflict and an insufficient, internal organization or "consensual basis" among the members to assist in its resolution.

There is a looping effect in the explanation: the heavy emphasis on maintenance or on keeping the students moving and getting them out before they had time to get into trouble also reinforced biracialness. The students seldom had time to do other than go to class and take care of themselves; therefore, they did little to alleviate the potential conflict and, in fact, the situation reinforced the biracialness that kept them apart.

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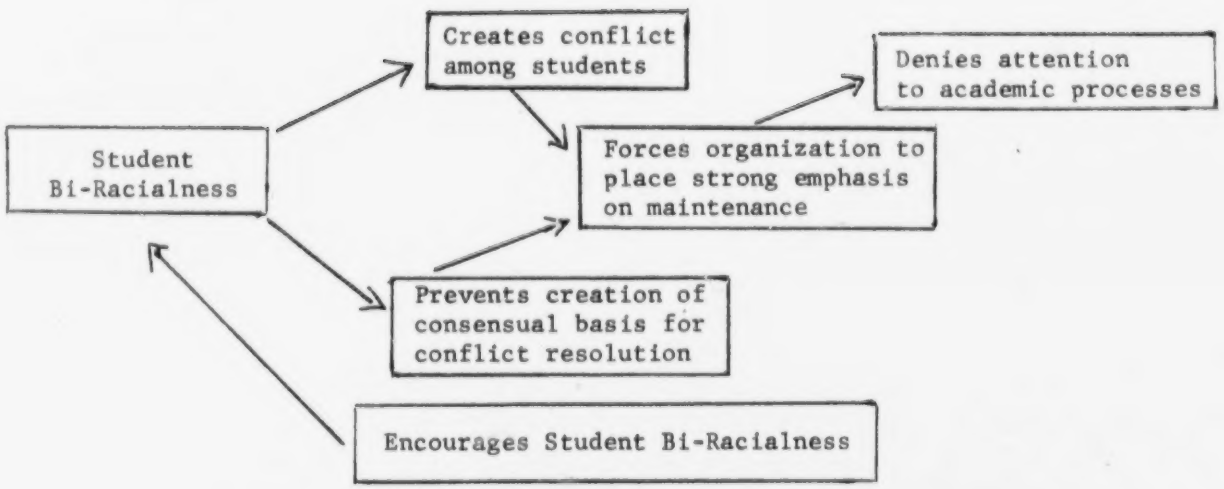
6. Ibid., page 157.


Creates conflict among students
Denies attention to academic processes
Student Bi-Racialness
Forces organization to place strong emphasis on maintenance
Prevents creation of consensual basis for conflict resolution
Encourages Student Bi-Racialness

A Chart Illustrating the Proposed Explanation of the Relationship Between Biracialness and the School Organization